

Reading Techniques

You will be faced with a variety of different kinds of reading assignments, such as textbooks, academic articles, novels, short stories, newspapers, and popular magazine articles. Here are a set of basic strategies that you should use for all your reading:

Before You Read

What do I want to learn? Why do I need to read this? What do I already know? Use helpful tools in pre-reading, including understanding why you are reading, setting goals for every time you read, connecting new information with old knowledge, and examining the structure of the text.

Things to think about when setting your goals:

- What is the relationship between the reading and other course material?
- Does the reading cover some of the same material as the lectures but in greater detail?
- Does the reading cover material that the instructor only mentioned briefly or not at all?
- Is the reading assigned as a counterpoint to viewpoints presented in the lecture or in other readings?
- How will you use the material in future classes?
- How will I know when I have learned the material from the reading and am ready to use it effectively when called on to do so?

Identify prior knowledge about the subject.

It is easier to learn something new if you can connect it to something you already know. If you do not immediately recognize your prior knowledge, stop to ask yourself some questions.

- What do I already know related to the subject of this reading?
- What do I already know about this class that will help me understand the material?
- Have I read something else on the same subject that makes a counter-argument?

Understand the structure of the text.

The structure of the text can help you understand the author's purpose and argument before you begin to read; understanding this structure will help you organize your thoughts as you read. Some kinds of texts (e.g., textbooks) provide an easy-to-use structure. Other texts, such as academic articles and novels, might not have an obvious structure, but understanding the typical structure of these kinds of texts can help you formulate your strategies.

While You Read

Learn how to use active reading strategies to help you elaborate on what you're reading (by marking the text, making summaries, asking yourself questions). Make what you're reading your own by using your own words and connecting new information with old knowledge.

Elaborate on the material to connect it to your prior knowledge and lead to further inquiry into the topic.

Mark up the text while you read.

- This involves much more than highlighting or underlining passages that you think are significant. You should write notes in the margins to help you think about what you are reading and begin to process the material into your long-term memory.
- Note where the text differs from the lecture and where the text complements the lecture. If you disagree with the author, note it in the margin. If it explains the professor's comments, note that in the margin, also. Write quick notes in your own words to summarize a passage or to note an example that will help you remember a concept.
- If an author is covering a series of points within a long passage, you can mark each point in the margin with a number, such as 1, and then add a brief statement in your own words. This will help you create a structure for the material.

Write summaries as you read.

- Writing a summary in your own words after reading a passage is a powerful way to remember the material. Write the summary without referring back to the reading. If you cannot do so, then go back and re-read the passage.
- Learning to write effective summaries will take practice. You will want to include enough information to capture the argument or significant points, but you do not want to simply copy the text.

Tips for writing summaries:

- Eliminate trivial and redundant information.
- Use lists. Sometimes your summary might be a list. Be discerning about what you include in the list; too much detail will not be helpful. Remember, it is a summary.
- Restate the topic sentences in your own words. If a text does not provide topic sentences, write your own.

Draw pictures and create mental images to help you remember.

If you are having trouble remembering the key points, turn the written descriptions into mental images or draw pictures. This strategy can range from drawing the actual parts of an atom to using a diagram to represent relationships between different historical events.

Ask yourself questions as you read.

Asking questions and making predictions keeps you thinking as you read and provides a way to monitor your comprehension. These questions can be as simple as asking "What is the main idea of this section?" You can also make questions out of the sub-headings in the text. For example, while reading a chapter on World War I in a history textbook, you run across the sub-heading "The Debate over American Involvement." Possible questions to ask might be: Who was involved in the debate? Why did some Americans want the U.S. to get involved in the war while others did not? What arguments did the two sides use?

After You Read

Post-reading techniques can help you organize information (by creating an outline, drawing concept maps, and chapter summaries) for better retention. Make connections by abstracting what you've learned as a image, process, or summary.

Employ organizational strategies.

Connect material to your prior knowledge and aid you in seeing the connections between different ideas and materials, after you have read.

Concept Maps

This technique enables you to see the relationships between ideas and facts and should reflect how you think about the subject.

- Start by listing the key ideas, concepts, terms, and facts from the reading. Then arrange these in a hierarchy with the most inclusive on top, working your way down to the least inclusive.
- To draw the concept map, start at the top with the most inclusive items and work your way down the page to the most specific items.
- Draw lines showing the connections between the different items. Label each line to show the connection.
- If you start a concept map and discover a better way to organize the material, do not be afraid to start over. This shows that you are thinking about the material and making sense of the overall structure of it.

Explore other strategies.

Ask general questions about the entire chapter and try to answer them without referring to the text or your notes.

- What was the main idea?
- How does this chapter relate to others?
- How does the reading relate to the lectures or discussions?

Write a summary.

- Writing a brief summary will prove that you have learned the material.
- Work with a friend to quiz each other on material.